

interactions

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The Waste Manifesto

Cover Story By Victor Margolin



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Editor's Note: The Timelines column was launched in 2006 around a three-row timeline focused on the 1940s through the present, designed with an assist from a great graphic designer. This provocative column has a timeline similar in outline, designed by a great graphic artist. Would that I could use big paper as effectively as she! —Jonathan Grudin

Understanding Visual Thinking: The History and Future of Graphic Facilitation

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Graphic facilitation—facilitating a meeting by taking continual, visual notes on a large scale—demands both attention and suspension. It's the most intense work I know. Listening isn't enough; drawing isn't enough. It's a high-wire act that taxes nerves, and after a session my wits are fried.

So when someone walks up in the pleasant hubbub of a break and says, "Great art! I wish I could draw like that," it reminds me that one should always carry a loaded cream pie.

Although tempting, throwing a pie at a meeting participant is against the ethical guidelines of graphic facilitation. "Drawing" isn't what's been frying my brain. The work isn't about drawing or art. The work is about graphically projecting ideas on a realistic worldview—as big paper on the wall. It's about understanding how the interplay of conference ideas is shifting a view, reflecting participation back to the group, helping to explore and document the new path, and making the change of direction graphically plain.

The Challenge

On a good day a graphic recorder's hand, ears, eyes, background, brain, and long-suffering feet are working independently and together, like the instruments in an orchestra. However, the work on the wall should feel effortless. Simplicity is the hard part; the drawing and color are minor tools.

The graphic challenge isn't verisimilitude or decoration. It's representing ideas as icons and placing them in context with other ideas. It also uses words—phrases, titles, topics, quotes, buzzwords—as graphic symbols on the same field. In this graphic world, the lettered words "ZERO

DEFECTS" can become a calligraphic representation of an entire concept. Calligraphy allows the concept to interact spatially, graphically, conceptually with iconic symbols of production: churning factories, busy production lines, measuring yardsticks, assembling screwdrivers, or inspecting flashlights. In this abstract and plastic world, graphic facilitators use a "bucket"—a shape, color block, or geometric form to "hold" a word, quote, symbol, or even list. That bucket can represent its broader concept and be interposed significantly on a plane of understanding with other ideas.

The graphic facilitator records a conference's topics and statements in a changing, evolving, connecting reality beyond typed words or drawn pictures. This synthetic idea-galaxy is in a dynamic state of creation, becoming a parallel world to the conference it reflects, but real enough to invite meeting members to glance up to see their own words and concepts progress in time and in relation to other ideas. This abstract galaxy records more than facts; it embraces conflict and shifts of understanding. It follows the cerebral track that brings a group's relationship to a new place. It traces the inevitable, inexorable flow of change, which can be too elusive to record in a paragraph.

The medium is important. It seems low-tech and, materially, it is. We're talking about paper taped to the wall in front of the working group. It's big; generally four feet high by eight feet long. The big paper presents ideas in human scale. It's a generous arena, large enough to show relationships between ideas, and long enough to hold the thoughts of an hour or more of conversation.

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The linear narrative, tabular data, and graphs of a written report are inadequate for embracing the map of ideas and the balance of topics. Simple flip-chart recordings, pictures, and bubble charts can't carry the conceptual content that goes onto big sheets of paper taped to a meeting-room wall. Big paper offers scope in recording and communicating the flow of a meeting for your broader organization. Corporations can realize a monetary value from this enhanced understanding and interrelationship of ideas expressed distinctly and memorably with big paper.

The History of Graphic Value

The worldview of the Middle Ages was linear and vertical: man at the muddy bottom gazing up at the unreachable rungs occupied by priests, warlords, bishops, minor kings, and the pope. Society was rigid, fixed by circumstance of birth and by noble favor.

The Industrial Revolution imposed a new worldview of business. Its web was a complex pyramid of authority with workforce at the bottom and money at the top, and many horizontal levels of supply, transport, decision, and regulation. Each link was a route to opportunity for a person with drive and ability.

We've entered a new age of information and global decision. Our worldview is not parochially two-dimensional, but vastly encompassing and nonlinear. The Industrial Revolution's pyramid organizational charts, with peons at the bottom and big cigars at the top, are relics. The instant communication of transformative technology and update of data relentlessly drive the flux of personnel and supply. Contemporary business is no longer cast in iron; it's complex, diverse and dynamic.

There is always a reluctance to leave comfortably known models when new data or attitudes demand a shift. Clinging to pyramids, bubble charts, and antiquated business structures can cripple our ability to reach further and change more gracefully. The medium affects the message; the visualization affects understanding.

If the medieval model of connection is the vertical ladder, and the industrial age model is the flat web, what is the global economy model of connection? An apt guess might be the neuron—that three-dimensional nexus of nerve endings that connects billions of signals in the brain,

routing them in every direction. The neuron is an elegant metaphor for near-instant communication plugging into all levels of a problem and solving for multiple variables. Our brains' neuron networks make up—singly and, arguably, as a group—a nonlinear processor of data responsible for human ingenuity and creativity.

The speed of transactions is now measured in nanoseconds. Corporate structure is contemplated in humanist concern for all the corporate parts—workers and managers. Corporate decisions are increasingly informed by more people embracing environmental, sociological, and ethical concerns. Business has become interactive, more fluid, less rigid, and more answerable to voices outside a hierarchy that would be imposed by an antique pyramid.

In the 1950s, the leading tool of business interaction was probably the flip chart. It was used to record ideas, make lists, display and alter titles. It was easily refreshed and constituted a running record. We had the physical tools of graphic facilitation then, but we hadn't yet developed the graphic and intellectual worldview to retask old tools and create a facile medium.

During this time businesses began, almost reluctantly, to utilize the psychological advances of the earlier 20th century. The National Training Laboratory was at the center of "corporate learning" in its use of Gestalt awareness, acknowledging the curious world of new, and less mechanistic, physics that had, after World War II, trickled into mainstream consciousness. The T-Group and experiential learning awakened a generation of new leaders.

Peter Drucker, the author of *The Future of Industrial Man*, published in 1942, was an early prophet of profound postwar change. His book could in retrospect be titled *The Birth of Systemic Thinking*. Other key publications driving new corporate awareness were Kurt Lewin's *Resolving Social Conflicts*, Ronald Lippitt's *Group Dynamics and Social Action*, and Drucker's *The Age of Discontinuity*. In 1957, Chris Argyris' *Personality + Organization* explored the way organizations "learned" and changed, and advocated experiential learning. Ludwig von Bertalanffy's General System Theory (GST), an overarching, interdisciplinary method of examining the influence of individual actions on group behavior, influenced the need to perceive the patterns of business interaction. The fluctuat-

